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Evergreen

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Evergreen

—*Pam K. Denniston*
Spanish, Sr.

DENISE took a deep breath of the clear air, welcoming the faint odor of lilacs in the distance. The gentle breeze, smelling of a spring shower, wisped an occasional strand of long hair across her forehead and eyes. She leaned her head back against the gnarled trunk of the old fir tree and stretched her legs out, the heavy heels of her muddy Weejuns sinking into the soft, clean grass. Sweeping her arms above her head, she grabbed the lowest limb and hoisted herself to her feet. Leaning her neck back to see the very top of the old fir, Denise thought it still seemed as tall as ever, but it hadn't reached the clouds yet, as she once told Punky it would. But this limb—she could rest her elbow on it now. It had once been such a feat to jump high enough to grab the limb and pull herself up into the hiding place of the tree. That one time, she had even caught the limb on a flying leap.

It had been sweltering all that August day. The gang sat in the shade of the old fir.

"Well, what should we do now?"

"We could try baseball again."

"Heck no, Binder'll kick us out. He said he'd take us down to the police station the next time."

"Well, geez, what does he think we're gonna do? Tear up his crummy ole cemetery?"

"Ah, I guess he doesn't like us using the tombstones for bases."

"Hey, let's play Cowboys and Indians."

"Ah, that's kid stuff. Let's go swimming in Flint Creek." Tim always wanted to play at the creek. He flopped down

on the nearest grave marker and wiped his sweating forehead with the sleeve of his T-shirt.

"Ohhhh no, Ertz, not us. Our dad will really get us this time if we go there. Don'cha know ya could drown? And Sis and Punk aren't goin' either."

"Oh shut up, Jimmy. You don't have to act like the big shot. We never even said we were goin'. We're gonna play Cowboys and Indians anyway. Punky, go get our guns."

"Hey, Punk, get my bow, too." Jimmy was always an Indian ever since he had made his bow and arrow at camp last summer.

"Punky and I are cowboys, and this is our side. Tom and Joey, you can be with us. You other guys go to the other side of the road." Denise and Punk were always cowboys so they could fight against Jimmy.

Tim and Mark raced to the Indian territory to take their places.

"Hey, Punky, hurry up!"

"Well, Jimmy, I can't run very fast with my cowboy boots on."

Jimmy grabbed his bow and stumbled across the road. He had never learned to run right; one foot always came down on top of the other. Punky and Denise strapped their studded holsters around their hips.

"You got the caps, Punky?"

"Yup." Punky dug deep into the pocket of his cotton boxer shorts and pulled out the red and black cardboard package.

"Good. We'll load behind this shrub. Tom and Joey, you guard the other side. Punky and I will take this front."

Denise and Punky had just loaded their Hopalong Cassidy guns and were on their stomachs waiting for the attack when they heard Tim scream the warning.

"Here he comes! Everybody scam!"

"Where is he, Sissy?"

"He'll be comin' around the bend any minute. C'mon, we'll take the fir tree." Denise tugged at Punky's elbow, but he was struggling to put his pistol back in his holster.

"No time for that, Punky!" she screamed. "He'll catch us for sure."

Denise and Punky ran to the fir tree, but Punky was ten paces behind, because he kept tripping on his holster. Denise grabbed the lowest limb on a running leap, whipped her legs around it and pulled herself to safety.

"Help me, Sissy! I can't reach!" Looking down, Denise saw Punky jumping up and down and flailing his arms wildly.

"Oh no!" Denise could hear Binder's car. "Try again. I'll catch your hands. But hurry!" Punky made one last frantic jump. Denise caught his hands on the limb before they slipped. "Climb your feet up the trunk." Punky obediently put his booted feet on the trunk and climbed, gasping and panting, to safety.

"Boy, that was close, Sissy!"

"Sure was. I'm gonna climb up to this next limb and see where everyone else is."

"Do ya see 'em?"

"Nope. I bet they all got away. But at least we're safe up here. Hey, look, here comes Binder."

Binder stepped out of his dusty white Cadillac and slammed the door. His white shirt stuck to his back in splotches of sweat. He ran his fingers through his greasy, black hair, pushing it straight back from his forehead. He put his hands on his hips and walked toward the tree.

"Oh, oh, he looks mad," Punky whispered.

"Shhh, he'll hear you."

"Okay, you kids, I know you're all here! Come on out." Punky grabbed the trunk of the tree tighter and turned his head away from Binder's snarling face.

"I said come on out!" Binder's roar echoed in the still cemetery.

"Sissy, I'm scared. I'm jumping down."

"Ohhhh no, you're not!"

"Oh, yes I am."

"Don't you tell him I'm here then," Denise whispered after him as Punky jumped to the ground.

"Okay, kid, where's everyone else?"

"I dunno. Guess they got away." Punky stood next to the tree trunk, adjusting his holster and pushing his gun deeper into it.

Binder looked down his long thin nose at Punky. "Anyone else up in that tree?"

"N-n-nope. Jus' my sister."

Oh boy, now you've done it, Punky! Denise pounded her fist against the tree and looked down, waiting for Binder's face to appear.

"You get down here!" Binder's face and neck were red, and sweat was streaming down his temples. He looked tiny and skinny standing so far below Denise. "I'm not waiting here forever! Now get down!"

Denise scrambled down to the first limb and did a monkey twist to the ground. She hurried over and stood next to Punky, her scratched, sweaty leg touching his. Binder paced back and forth, his hands on his hips.

"All right, now who are you kids?"

"Who can I say we are?" Denise thought. "I could say we're two of the Ertz kids. They have twelve kids, and he'd never know we aren't them. Yeah, the Ertz kids—that's it!"

"We're two of the Er . . ."

But Punky cut Denise off and blurted out, "We're Walkers. I'm Punky, but really my name is Jon, and she's Sissy, but really her name is Denise, and we have a brother, Jimmy, and he was an Indian, but he got away, and we have a baby, Gerry, but he never comes in your cemetery. He doesn't even walk." Punky finished with a hopeful grin. Denise grimaced and pinched him on his shoulder. "You stop that, Sissy!" he whined under his breath.

"I've had all I can take of you kids. This isn't a place to play, you know. It's a cemetery, and that means it's sacred." That sounded silly to Denise, but Binder's voice was harsh and rough, and she didn't want to ask him to explain himself. "So I don't want to see you in here again. Now get on home."

Denise and Punky turned to leave, but they were stopped by Binder's afterthought. "And the next time I'll take you all to the police station." Binder stood watching them, so Punky and Denise ran home as fast as they could, with Punky trailing behind, trying to keep his holster up.

"And the next time I'll take you all to the police station." Denise remembered that harsh warning vividly. "He

always said that, but he never took us down.” She let her arms slip from around the tree limb and sat down between two protruding roots of the old tree. Denise leaned her head on her knee and let the crisp air wisp against her face, but she turned around suddenly at the sound of a car crunching over the cinders in the road. “Oh my gosh, it’s Binder,” she snickered to herself. “He still drives a big dusty white Cadillac.” He wore a white dress shirt and a narrow black tie. He still combed his hair in a greasy black pompadour. He eyed Denise suspiciously as he drove slowly by. Denise remembered the time he had driven off the road and right over the graves to catch them.

“We better go home, Sissy. It’s dark, and I bet Mama has supper ready.”

“Just a minute. We almost forgot the big ole fir tree.”

“Okay, but let’s hurry. I’m freezing, and I got snow in my boots when we jumped over that drift.”

“Yeah, this’ll be the last one. Watch this, Punky.” Denise unscrewed a blue light from the string of Christmas tree lights wound around the great old fir and threw it into the air. She wobbled backwards trying to see how it had gone. “It landed somewhere, but I can’t see it. It’s too dark.”

“Ah, I can do better than that.” Punky quickly unscrewed a large red bulb and, with a low underarm swing, he threw the bulb up into the darkness.

“Wow! That really flew! Hey, let’s find the cord for this tree.”

“Here it is.” Punky followed the heavy black cord over to the electrical outlet. Denise watched the tree go from its multitude of reds, blues and greens to pitch black.

“You did it! Let’s go home now.”

“Yeah, I’m starved. Ya know, I bet we turned off every Christmas tree light in this whole cemetery.”

“Nah, not all of ’em. They put lights on the trees in the old part too, and we weren’t down there.” Denise walked ahead of Punky, talking over her shoulder and kicking flurries of the weightless snow into the air with her red boots.

"Yeah, you're right, I guess. Should we tell Daddy what we've been doing, Sissy? He always says it's stupid to put Christmas tree lights in a cemetery."

"Heck no, we can't tell him. We'd get in all kinds of trouble if he knew."

"Yeah, I guess he would get mad. Hey, Sissy, do you hear a car?" Punky stopped and peered into the darkness.

Denise turned and walked back to stand by Punky. "Yeah, I think I do. I don't see any lights though. It's probably just around the bend."

"We better run, Sissy. We can be in our yard by the time they get this far."

"Why? They don't know we did anything. We could say we were visiting Grandpa's grave."

"But Grandpa isn't buried in this cemetery."

"Well, geez, Punky, they don't know that."

"What if it's Binder?"

"He can't do nothin'."

The car came racing up the road and onto the soft snow of the cemetery grounds.

"Oh no! It's Binder! Run, Punky, run!"

"What did I tell ya, Sissy? What did I tell ya?"

One of the front wheels hit a grave marker, and the big white Cadillac came to an abrupt stop, the bright headlights flooding the two scampering figures.

"Stop!"

"Don't stop, Punky! Just keep running. Maybe we can get away."

Binder ran after them and caught them by the furry collars of their parkas.

"What the hell do you two think you're doing?" he screamed in their faces.

"Nothin'!" Punky was on the verge of tears.

"We didn't do anything. We—uh—we jus' went to see our grandfather's grave."

"Don't lie! What about all the Christmas tree lights? I suppose they turned themselves out?" Punky and Denise huddled closer together, shivering under his snarl. Binder

took a pad of paper and a pen out of his heavy tweed overcoat and stuffed one of his black leather gloves in his pocket. "Now, give me your names."

"Punky—er—Jon."

"I'm Denise Walker. He's my brother."

"Where do you live?"

"Right there." Punky pointed his blue-mittened hand at the brick house.

"Okay, now get on home." He gave them each a shove in the direction of the brick house. "Don't let me see you in here again or I'll take ya down to the police station."

Punky and Denise ran away as fast as they could, his words trailing behind them.

Denise shivered at the thought of how powerful Binder's words had seemed. She stood and walked around the old fir. All of the graves still had their dry evergreen wreaths on them with crumbling pine cones and torn red plastic bows, except for the new one. It was covered with the yellows of daffodils and daisies and the pinks and reds of roses. She bent down and picked a blue carnation from a basket. She looked up, fearful that Binder would be standing over her, his hands on his hips, just waiting for her to take the flower from the grave as she and Punky once had done.

"Let's do something, Sissy." Punky and Denise were ambling through the cemetery, weaving around the grave markers and jumping over them.

Denise sat down under the fir tree, adjusting her socks that had slipped down around the tops of her scuffed brown and white saddle shoes. "Sit down, Punky. I got this idea." Punky skipped over to the tree and sat on the big root rising out of the ground. "Now, get a load of this. You see that grave?" Denise pointed to a new grave, covered with the ambers and golds of autumn flowers. Punky nodded his head enthusiastically. "Now you see, this is it. We take the flowers from there because there are so many and put them on the other graves 'cause they don't have any. Then everyone's happy, right?"

"Right."

They hopped to their feet and scurried through the crunching dry leaves. Denise pulled a wreath of large yellow and gold mums from the soft, muddy ground.

"Boy, this is a big one. Help me carry it over to this next grave." Together they stuck it in the ground.

"That was too heavy. Let's take littler ones from now on."

They carried baskets and bouquets and little wreaths until each of the surrounding graves had a touch of the amber and gold. They sat down triumphantly under the fir.

"What now, Sissy?"

"Let's go find Jimmy and Tom. Maybe they wanna play in the ravine." They stood and skipped out toward the road. Denise stopped suddenly, grabbing Punky by the arm. "Binder!" she gasped. She looked frantically in all directions, thinking she should run someplace, but her legs seemed paralyzed and didn't move her an inch. Binder came closer and closer. He walked with long strides, never taking his narrow, beady eyes off them.

"Oh, oh! What now, Sissy?"

"Nothin'. We didn't do anything, remember?"

"Where do you kids think you're going?" His voice boomed out from across the road.

"Down to the ravine. We're gonna go play down in the ravine." Punky crushed the leaves under his foot with the toe of his shoe.

"Listen here. You're not goin' anyplace till you put this grave back together. Who do you think you are—damaging property like this?"

"We didn't damage anything."

"Don't give me any back talk, young lady. Just get yourselves busy and put every one of those flowers back on this grave." He looked fierce. Punky stood motionless with tears in his eyes and his mouth hanging open. Denise didn't want to take any chances; this could just be the time he would take them down to the police station. She grabbed Punky's arm, and they hurried over to the grave where they had put the wreath of large yellow and gold mums. Stumb-

ling over each other and the wreath, they took it back to the new grave. Binder stood, with his hands on his hips, peering down at them over his long, skinny nose.

"There's fat ole Mrs. Hosenfratz standing over there in her picture window," Denise whispered to Punky. "I just bet that she called Binder and told on us."

"Yeah, she's always turning everybody in. She told Mama that we disturb the dead."

"Oh brother!"

"Quit talking and finish this up." Binder's unexpected growl sent Denise and Punky scurrying in all directions picking up baskets and bouquets and little wreaths. They didn't stop to catch their breath until their work was done.

"Are you the Walker kids?"

"Yep. She's Denise, my sister, and I'm Punky, but I guess you better call me Jon." Denise wished Punky wouldn't always blurt out the truth. If he gave her a couple of seconds, she could save them with a good lie.

"Well, I've had enough trouble with both of you. This is your last chance. If I catch you in here again, I'm going to take you right down to the police station, and they'll put you in jail. Now get out of my cemetery!" He pointed his long index finger toward their house, and they pivoted instantly and ran away from him.

"We'll cut down to the ravine behind the Anderson's house, Punky, and find Jimmy and Tom. I bet that ugly Mrs. Hosenfratz called Mama, and we better not go home for a while.

Denise dropped the blue carnation back in the basket. She ran her fingers along the name and date on the temporary metal marker:

Jon N. Walker

1949-1968

She pulled herself slowly to her feet with the help of the low limb of the old fir that hung over the new grave. Tearing a little branch from the limb, Denise turned quickly and walked away toward the brick house on the edge of the cemetery.